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PROGRAM CBS Evening News

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SUBJECT Illegal Shipments of American Helicopters

DAN RATHER: U.S. Customs agents knew about illegal shipments of American helicopters to North Korea for 16 months without doing anything about it. So claims an internal analysis made by the Commerce Department. This is the latest development in the Washington game of everybody trying to-blame somebody else for the embarrassing fact that North Korea got 87 helicopters it never was supposed to get.

Pentagon correspondent David Martin has more about the case.

DAVID MARTIN: Officials are calling it the largest illegal diversion of U.S. aircraft ever. As many as 87 of these Hughes 500 helicopters are now in the hands of one of this country's bitterest foes, North Korea.

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE CASPAR WEINBERGER: It's a very unfortunate result and one that we're doing our best to correct.

MARTIN: U.S. Customs agents reportedly found out about the illegal shipments when they began back in 1983, but no attempt was made to stop the shipments until the Commerce Department found out about them on its own nearly a year and a half later.

The helicopters left their California plant destined for West Germany. But when they reached Europe they were secretly transferred to a Soviet ship and delivered to North Korea.

GENERAL JOHN VESSEY: The helicopters are [for] civilian purposes, but the same helicopter is used for military purposes.

MARTIN: The U.S. used them in Grenada to rocket enemy positions. Pentagon analysts say the North Koreans could use them to infiltrate South Korea, which has 200 Hughes helicopters of its own. Painted to look exactly like the South Korean version, the North Korean helicopters could slip across the border and create havoc behind the lines. As a precaution against such an attack, sources say South Korea temporarily grounded all its Hughes helicopters.

The helicopters were smuggled into North Korea at a time when U.S. Intelligence has detected a major redeployment of North Korean troops within 75 miles of the DMZ.

But the North Korean military is not invincible. CBS News has learned that last Wednesday a North Korean submarine, like this one, sank with all hands aboard in 350 feet of water. A small flotilla of Soviet and North Korean ships is trying to raise the sub, but U.S. analysts believe the crew has perished by now.